Consumer Socialization: the Role of Hunting and Gun Rituals in Becoming a Man

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Consumer socialization is examined through the use of gun and hunting rituals in the hunting subculture. Through the use of shared stories, rituals, values, and rites of passage surrounding the gun, family members socialize young men for a period spanning two decades. We use Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory to document this socialization process as youths move across the stages of pre-hunter, neophyte, and apprentice, and competent hunters. We find that expression of masculinity is changes based on equipment relationships and hunting motive resulting in 4 categories of hunter: traditionalist, gearhead, experiential, and transcendental.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The modern practice of recreational hunting is a domain that has been understudied in the sociological and anthropological literature and completely neglected in the consumer research literature. Anthropology has largely focused on the history of hunting as interpreted via modern day hunter-gatherer societies as a means of studying human development, while sociology has focused on the extremities of the hunting culture such as poaching or on the ethics of hunting or eating meat. The neglect in consumer research is particularly surprising for two reasons. First, hunting in pre-historic times represents the earliest representation of key consumption and acquisition activities. While today we shop, previously we hunted. And activities such as sharing meat that continue to exist today, both among modern hunters and among still-existing hunter-gatherer societies, suggest remnants of one of the earliest forms of exchange. Second, hunting is an area in which study of the extended consumer socialization process in families—typically between fathers and their sons—can be examined. New hunters, along with their male mentors, undergo a years- or decades-long process of socialization into the skills, social norms, and values of the hunting culture. This socialization process, along with the ensuing expression of masculinity by hunters, is the focus of this study.

Children develop through both cognitive and social means and both have been suggested as important foci for the study of consumer socialization (Moschis and Moore 1979; Roedder John 1999). In consumer research, however, the cognitive development of socialization has attracted the most attention. In this stream of literature, socialization is envisioned as progressing through a series of three stages that are related to the child’s age (Roedder John 1999): a perceptual stage focused toward “immediate and readily observable perceptual features of the marketplace” (186), an abstract analytic stage where the child shifts to more symbolic thought where s/he can see multiple perspectives, and a reflective stage in which the child is able to grasp not only functional meanings of the consumption experience but also its more subtle social meanings. This approach sees the child attaining specific skills at universal stages with this progression depending on the complexity of the child’s existing cognitive structures and is based on theory developed originally by Jean Piaget (1963). In contrast to this Piagetian perspective, we find that an explanation that explicitly includes the influence of family members and other mentors more richly explains the socialization process into hunting.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured, in-depth interviews of approximately two hours with twenty-seven adult male hunters and a wildlife manager, including interviewing separately 5 fathers and sons who hunt. The secondary method was participant observation of the hunting community, including hunter safety classes, hunting and gun shows, informal interviews with hunting-related retailers, and participation in hunting trips. A hermeneutical analysis of the text was conducted, based on the assumption that consumers’ personal histories are embedded within a context of personal meanings expressed by “culturally shared narrative forms” (Thompson 1997, 439-40), involving an intra-textual analysis resulting in a written interpretation of each informant and an inter-textual analysis comparing themes across informants.

Our findings suggest that consumer socialization can be conceptually expanded to include the dynamics by which social influences such as family impact the process through which young men learn to hunt, making use of Lev Vygotsky’s theory of development (Vygotsky 1978; Tudge and Scrimsher 2003) that stresses the importance of interpersonal interaction in the socialization process. Hunters progress through four distinct stages that are characterized by support, challenge, and encouragement by their mentors. Pre-hunters accompany their mentors hunting, participating in scouting and retrieving activities, while neophytes have proven they are responsible enough to carry a loaded gun. Apprentice hunters hunt independently without their mentors, exhibiting camaraderie and challenge with their peers, and competent hunters have moved past the need to prove themselves and have achieved actualization of their masculinity in ways discussed in the following section.

Competent hunters negotiate masculinity in ways that relate both to the mediating role that equipment plays in constructions of the “extended self” (Belk 1988) and to the primary motivation achieved from participating in the activity of hunting. Their equipment meanings vary on a continuum between meanings that are intrinsic to the equipment (e.g., accuracy, technical aspects) and meanings that are extrinsic to the equipment (e.g., personal history, nostalgia). The second factor relates to the approach to the hunt, which varies from a focus on the experience of the hunt (a process orientation) to a focus on the final kill (an ends orientation).

Thus, four subgroups of hunters emerged: traditionalists, gearheads, experientialists, and transcendentalists, and we found that masculinity is both expressed and understood differently by the four types of hunters. For traditionalists, hunting is deeply intertwined with rural family traditions and results in easily achieved close male social bonds. Technology mediates the hunting experience for the gearhead through mastery of equipment in both skill development and customization, he expresses his masculinity through his desire for control, order, precision, and accuracy, and is unique among hunters in his focus on a hierarchy based on technical expertise. Masculinity for the experiential hunter harkens back to finding his particular place in both the natural and the social worlds. Rather than dominating nature, the experiential is interconnected with nature. Transcendental hunters represent a category of masculinity that affirms emotional bonds to both family and nature by using their family socialization and life long hunting experience to achieve a balance between stereotypically feminine characteristics of empathy and caring and a stereotypically masculine activity of hunting and killing in competition with other men.

REFERENCES


